Home Alone?

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In my recent pamphlet, *Canon Law and Common Sense,* I mentioned a certain type of person one occasionally encounters in the traditionalist movement: the layman who treats canon law like a handy source for "proof-texts" which he can use to dismiss everyone else as non-Catholic. The practical advice he gives is always the same: All traditional chapels and priests are illicit and therefore evil; stay home this Sunday to worship in the room of your choice. Your religious life thus ends up something like a perpetual re-run of *Home Alone*, minus a happy ending.

Recently, devotees of this position have also been claiming that their condemnations are based on Catholic doctrine infallibly proclaimed by the Council of Trent. They're given to photocopying sections of the Council's Decree on Holy Orders, and underlining the following passages:

The holy Synod teaches, furthermore, … that those who by their own temerity take these offices upon themselves, are not ministers of the Church, but are to be regarded as "thieves and robbers, who have not entered by the door."

Can. 7. If anyone says… that those who have been neither rightly ordained nor sent by ecclesiastical and canonical authority, but come from a different source, are lawful ministers of the word and of the sacraments: let him be anathema.

These passages are usually accompanied by handwritten margin notes, the work of some anonymous home-alone canonist. He argues thus: Traditional priests function without correct canonical permissions. They therefore "take these offices upon themselves," and are not ministers of the Church, but *thieves and robbers*. (Always double underlined.) They have not been "rightly" ordained in conformity with canon law, nor have they been "sent by ecclesiastical and canonical authority." Rather, traditional priests "come from a different source," and are thus not "lawful ministers of the word and of the sacraments." If you say otherwise, you *deny Catholic dogma* (double underlined), and are *anathema — outside the Church!* (Double, if not triple, underlined!) You cannot assist at the Masses of these priests and remain a Catholic, so *stay at home!*

When the Church condemned a false doctrinal proposition, she attached to it a censure which precisely expressed the degree of the error: e.g., "heretical," "favoring heresy," "rash," "offensive to pious ears," etc. For the foregoing

argument, however, the Church would need to create a new category — one entitled "*really* stupid." A little harsh, Father? Well, consider:

(1) Our home-alone canonist thinks Trent was condemning one thing, when in fact it was condemning another.

(2) He's based his argument on a defective translation, but doesn't realize this since he's ignorant of Latin.

1. Trent Condemns Lay Ordination. The purpose of Trent's decree on Holy Orders was to restate Catholic doctrine on the sacrament, and to condemn a whole passel of protestant heresies regarding it — e.g., that Holy Orders is not a sacrament but a human invention, that the Minor Orders do not exist, that all Christians alike are priests, that there is no hierarchy of Orders, etc.

Among the protestant heresies the Council condemned was one which asserted that the assent of the people or of the civil magistrate is all you need to make someone a minister of the word and the sacraments. This heresy denies the sacramental character of Holy Orders. It reduces the priesthood to a political office devoid of any objective sacramental power.

The home-aloner happened across the decree's language condemning the lay ordination heresy and misread it as a condemnation of priests ordained without dimissorial letters from a diocesan bishop, or some other such thing. He might have discovered this error, had he read the first part of the sentence (set below in **bold**), instead of merely the phrase he underlined at the end:

The holy Synod teaches, furthermore, **that in the ordination of bishops, priests, and of other orders, the consent, or call, or authority of the people, or of any secular power or magistrate is not so required for the validity of the ordination; but rather it decrees that those who are called and instituted *only* by the people [**original emphasis in 1954 translation**], or by the civil power or magistrate and proceed to exercise these offices, and** that those who by their own temerity take these offices upon themselves, are not ministers of the Church, but are to be regarded as "thieves and robbers, who have not entered by the door." (Dz 960)

From the first part of the sentence, it is absolutely clear who it is that the Council is denouncing as "thieves and robbers": those who receive only a sort of lay ordination from the people or state (rather than true sacramental ordination from a bishop), and who then perform sacramental and ministerial functions proper to an ordained priest alone.

The home-aloner also cites Canon 7 which follows the doctrinal decree on Holy Orders. The canon, he says, condemns in an infallible manner those who operate without "officially-delegated authority."

This too is utterly false. The passage in Canon 7 corresponds to the passage in the doctrinal decree, and (like the decree) says nothing whatsoever about "officially-delegated authority." It merely condemns more solemnly what the doctrinal decree condemns: the protestant position that a sort of "lay ordination" suffices to confer sacraments.

2. A Faulty Translation. Home-aloners point to two phrases from the canon, noted below in **bold**, which they believe condemn clerics who haven't received the various permissions canon law requires before ordination:

If anyone says… that those who have been neither **rightly** ordained nor sent **by ecclesiastical and canonical authority,** but come from a different source, are lawful ministers of the word and of the sacraments: let him be anathema.

Here, what began as tragedy ends as farce. The translation the home-aloners used for the phrases in bold turns out to be defective. The home-aloners, ignorant of Latin, based their entire argument on these mistranslated phrases. Here is the Latin text of Canon 7 and a correct translation.

Si quis dixerit… ordines ab ipsis [episcopis] collatos sine populi vel potestatis saecularis consensu aut vocatione irritos esse; aut eos, qui nec ab ecclesiastica et canonica potestate rite ordinati nec missi sunt, sed aliunde veniunt, legitimos esse verbi et sacramentorum minstros: A.S. (Dz 967)

If anyone says… that orders conferred by [bishops] without the consent or call of the people or of the secular power are invalid; or, that those who have been neither **ordained by ecclesiastical and canonical power with the proper ceremonies** nor sent, but come from elsewhere, are lawful ministers of the word and of the sacraments: let him be anathema.

The phrase in **bold** presents quite a different picture. Home-aloners have written reams of polemics against traditional priests, all of it based on the assumption that the phrase "rightly ordained" has something to do with observing the p's and q's of canon law on obtaining permissions for performing ordinations. But the Latin expression *rite ordinati* does not mean something like "rightly ordained canon-law-wise." *Rite* (pronounced ree-tay), means rather that someone was ordained "*with all the proper liturgical ceremonies*" — and every traditional priest I know most certainly was.[1]

Another favorite home-aloner phrase in the canon, "sent by ecclesiastical and canonical authority," is likewise a mistranslation. For starters, the part of the phrase beginning with "by" has been misplaced in the translation. In Latin it modifies "ordained," not "sent."[2] "Authority," moreover, is an incorrect translation here for *potestas*, which means "power." The specific kind of power is the Church's *sacramental* power, here referred to as "ecclesiastical and canonical power" (*ecclesiastica et canonica potestate*), so as to distinguish it from the purely secular power (*potestatis saecularis*) deemed sufficient by the protestants to make a sacramental minister, and singled out for condemnation in the preceding phrase of the canon.

Put simply, Canon 7 in Latin doesn't say what the home-aloners thought it said. Rather, the canon condemns sacramental ministry without true sacramental ordination.

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The passages from the Council of Trent our home-alone canonist has so eagerly seized upon, therefore, can in no way be applied to traditional Catholic priests. The passages condemn a specific protestant heresy: that the consent of the people or the civil government is sufficient (or necessary) to authorize men as "lawful ministers of the word and of the sacraments." No traditional Catholic priest teaches that.

Our home-alone canonist has thus managed to get absolutely everything wrong. He's misread a decree of the Council of Trent, trumped up phony charges against traditional Catholic priests, and issued an anathema on the basis of a faulty translation — enough, surely, to merit the new theological censure of "*really* stupid."

Errors in dogma, moral theology and canon law are the stock-in- trade of home-alone theorists. To refute their foolishness each time they try to throw yet *more* traditional Catholics out of the Church is, in the final analysis, a waste of time. They just turn the page in their one-volume canon law paraphrases or vernacular mistranslations of Denziger, and try to invent yet another reason for condemning everyone else.

Where this has led the home-aloners is plain for all to see — to a bitter, sacrament-less exile, a poetic punishment, perhaps, for their pride in having presumed to tackle issues light-years above their own abilities.

The best antidote to such folly is common sense. The Church with her sacramental ministry and visible hierarchy will continue until the end of time,[3] and Catholics will go on obeying the Third Commandment, pretty much as their forefathers did. It's all so simple that a child could figure it out.

Try it with an eight-year-old come Mass time next Sunday: even *he* knows you shouldn't stay home alone.

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Addendum: Home-Aloners Excommunicated?

A few weeks after I circulated *Home Alone?* as a pamphlet, someone sent me the following passage from Pope Pius IV's Bull *Benedictus Deus* (26 January 1564). The Bull, which confirms the decrees of the Council of Trent, imposes a *latae sententiae* (automatic) excommunication on anyone who, without the approval of the Holy See, presumes "to publish in any form any commentaries, glosses, annotations, scholia on, or any kind of interpretation whatsoever of the decrees of this council." The reason for this prohibition, the Bull stated, was to avoid the "perversion and confusion" arising from private commentaries on and interpretations of the Tridentine decrees.

This, my correspondent pointed out, is exactly what the home-aloners have done. The peculiar principles they employ for interpreting Trent, he added, would then logically dictate that home-aloners consider themselves excommunicated by the very fact that they have published unauthorized commentaries on the Tridentine decrees.

This, needless to say, puts the home-aloner in a bit of a pickle: on one hand, logic dictates that he consider himself excommunicated; on the other, he denies that anyone still has the authority to lift an excommunication. It will be interesting to see the explanations home-aloners offer to deal with these inconveniences.

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[1] Home-aloners have tried to press into service two other terms to support their condemnations: (1) "*Regularly* ordained." This, it turns out, the home-aloners lifted out of context from the Profession of Faith prescribed for the Waldensian heretics (Dz 424). The point of the passage was to get the Waldensians to forswear their heresy that someone other than an ordained priest could confect the Eucharist. Here, *regulariter* means merely "ordained in the usual way," as contrasted with the Waldensians' "not ordained at all." (2) The Lateran Council's denunciation of "*vain ordinations unknown to ecclesiastical rule*" (Dz 274). This is merely part of an excommunication levied against those who would dare ordain Monothelite heretics. The home-aloners' ignorance of Latin and tendency to lift phrases out of context has done them in here too. *Ordinationes vacuas ecclesiasticae regulae incognitas* is the original phrase. An ordination that is *vacua* is not merely "vain"; it's invalid. A more accurate translation is: "Invalid ordinations

unrecognized by ecclesiastical law" — a completely different kettle of canonical fish, obviously, since *validity* rather than *liceity* is the issue. Finally, it's hard to see how either of the two strictures would apply to traditional priests, since very few of us (I suspect) are Waldensians or Monothelites.

[2] Traditional priests are "sent" in any case — by the legislator who (as we noted in *Canon Law and Common Sense*) wills above all the salvation of souls, and also in virtue of the text of the ordination rite itself.

[3] "Just as [Christ] *sent* the Apostles whom He had chosen for Himself from the world (*as He Himself was sent by the Father*), so too He willed that there be pastors and teachers in the Church *unto the end of time*." Vatican I, Dz 1821.